PRISON WORKSONGS

Recorded at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola, La., by Dr. Harry Oster

ARHOOLIE CD 448

1. **BERTA** - sung by Big Louisiana (Rodney Mason), Rev. Rogers, & Roosevelt Charles
2. **TAKE THIS HAMMER** - sung by Guitar Welch, Hogman Maxey, & Andy Mosely
3. **STEWBALL** - sung by Rev. Rogers, Big Louisiana, & Jose Smith
4. **FIVE LONG YEARS FOR ONE MAN** - sung by Odea Mathews
5. **ALBERTA LET YOUR BANGS GROW LONG** - sung by Guitar Welch, Hogman Maxey, & Andy Mosely
6. **I HAD FIVE LONG YEARS** - sung by James Russell
7. **EARLY IN THE MORNIN'** - sung by Johnny Butler
8. **ALL TEAMED UP IN ANGOLA'S MULE LOT** - sung by Roosevelt Charles, Arthur Davis, & Big Louisiana
9. **I GOT A HURTIN' IN MY RIGHT SIDE** - sung by Willy Rafus and work gang
10. **LET YOUR HAMMER RING** - sung by Big Louisiana, Willy Rafus, & Arthur Davis
11. **CLEANING THIS HIGHWAY** - sung by Willy Rafus, Andy Mosely, & Johnny Butler
12. **JOHN HENRY** - sung by Guitar Welch, Hogman Maxey, & Robert Pete Williams
13. **SOMETHING WITHIN ME** - sung by Odea Mathews
14. **JESUS CARES** - sung by Murray Macon
15. **WORKING ON THE LEVEE** Part 1 (Good Morning Captain) - sung by Emanuel Dunn
16. **WORKING ON THE LEVEE** - Part 2
17. **TAKE THIS HAMMER** - sung by Big Louisiana
18. **PICKIN' COTTON ALL DAY LONG** - sung by two sisters, Creola and Ceola Scott
19. **MY MULE "GREY"** (A Plowing Song) - sung by Emanuel Dunn

Lead is sung by first singer(s) listed.

Recorded by Dr. Harry Oster at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, La. and other locations, mostly in 1959.

Edited and produced by Dr. Harry Oster

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Introduction

In order to understand the intense bitterness, anguish and desperation of the African American prison worksongs which used to be sung constantly at Angola and other prisons like it, one must picture the vicious practices of the prison administrations of the 1930s. The world in which the worksong flourished springs to life in the colorful words of Roosevelt Charles, a man in his early forties who has been in and out of Angola four times in the last twenty-two years.

"Back in 1937, times was hard and work was hard, the boss was very hard, the inmates they were very cruel sometimes themselves. You get out on the job some time early in the mornin' we'd be drowsy feelin' bad. The leader of Number One would go to hollerin' 'John Henry!' That mean pick up your tools up high and let 'em fall together. Boys, then the life would hit the gang an' they would start to rollin' on.

"Every now an' then you'd call the water boy and the water boy he'd look around at the boss. The boss would tell him, 'Ya can carry him water if ya wanta, and if you don't ya don't hafta because they get water outa the tools.' They mean by gettin' water outa the tools you'd hafta drink the sweat from yo' top lip.

"So then you'd roll on until about half past eleven; you'd go out an' you'd strike a track, run all the way. That means run. Run maybe sometimes five and six miles. To get to yo' food. Then yo' would sit down to eat. You'd find a fly in yo' plate an guess what'd be applied to you. Ya shouldn't-a said nothin' about it. You better break it in half and give yo' partner half. You know it was kinda hard then. An' then if you'd raise too much bug about

that, the boss'd take yo' plate an' give it to yo' partner, and then you'd have to work on before you'd get anything else.

"Then you'd go in an' you just might find a rat in yo' plate. Then if yo' said anything, better not breathe above a whisper—yo' might have trouble with the man.

"So by and by, trouble lightly, lighten up. The boys they would start to singing, still in the spirit along the way.

"Go in the cell room sometime yo'd be feelin' bad. Somebody across the cell room would holler, 'John Henry.' The back water on the levee'd begin risin'. You know what that would call for—plenty work! Some time twelve o'clock at night yo' raise out a' bed, workin' from then until twelve o'clock the next night. In a track, an' if yo' fall, hmm, yo' better not fall in the way; ya better roll to the side when yo' fall. And they take yo' and put yo' in a heap to see what put yo' out. So the boys in the long line holla,

If yo' go to St. Gabriel,[1] yo' might get by.
The boys in Angola has got to rise and fly.
If yo' go to Angola yo' just might get by.

"Course, mattersafact some people may not know what that means. The man'd holla to the water boy, 'I got ten for the water cart, nine for the hospital, two for the graveyard.'

"An' so that would cause a very miserable thing when he got hollerin' that. Make ya feel bad! And then otherwise, yo' do mo' better if yo' get a few lines from home for consolation, but a great deal of time, yo' can't get no mail from home. Everybody at home done turned their back on ya. An' then yo' feel like yo' is in the world all alone.

"Some of the boys they try to take Lawyer Green and Lawyer Bushes. Lawyer Green, that mean the woods up on the hillside. That's after ya get off the river. An' ya be makin' the hilltop, crossin' over into Mississippi in the woods. That's Lawyer Green. An' Lawyer Bushes, that's a tree top. That's when yo' jumpin' from limb to limb crossin' them ravines an' gullies. En' Mississippi they call that *Mississloppy*—that's the Mississippi River when yo' been tryin' to swim across. That's too much water to try to drink. So yo' got to try to swim. But you can't go round—it ain't got no end. In the meantime some would make it an' some wouldn't. Some would get shot down an' some

would get caught. But of course the warden, he would holla, 'Don't bring none back alive. Say, I got a carload o' leather (whips); I got two carloads o' buckshot, an' I ain't issuin' my buckshot so I can cripple a man 'cause I can't use him when he's crippled...

"If yo' couldn't make it, yo' knew what would be the consequence behind it. Some tried to go home, they wouldn't make it. They'd go home, but they'd go head first![2]"

The official records at Angola throw further light on the treatment of prisoners. Between 1929 and 1940 more than 10,000 floggings occurred. The whip consisted of two belts of sole leather five feet long, three to four inches wide, attached to a heavy wooden handle.

The authorities had prisoners whipped for not only major infractions but also frequently for minor sins. When the general manager's waterless cooker dropped off the back of his car onto the highway, a convict driving a cane cart inadvertently ran over it. His punishment was twenty lashes. Under one work speed-up system, the last five convicts to reach the ends of their rows of cane to cut down would be flogged. Often sixty and seventy year old prisoners were whipped for supposed laziness, once an eighty year old man and even several fifteen year old prisoners.

In cutting cane, the prisoner had to be careful to cut close to the top as well as close to the ground in trimming cane stalks in order to produce the maximum yield of sugar. Getting a low bottom was particularly important since the last joint of the cane next to the ground has the most sucrose in it. The prisoner whose cane knife slipped faced a vicious whipping for his mistake.

In some instances the authorities showed more consideration for the mules than for the men, the punishment for a prisoner charged with carelessly injuring a mule's shoulder was twenty lashes.

Early in the morning, when the prisoners got up, was flogging time. No orders from the main office were necessary and frequently the prisoner was not even told the reason for his punishment.

Three or four blows vigorously applied to a convict's bare back could and generally did break the skin. Few prisoners failed to start screaming at the fifth or sixth blow. As many as thirty-five could put a convict in the hospital. Punishments of fifty lashes, however, were not uncommon.[3]

A favorite slogan of the authorities was

Never mind the weather
We'll buy a car of leather.

As we shall see from examining the texts of the worksongs in addition to their basic function of making work go more smoothly and easily, they served as an outlet for the violent resentments of prisoners under the cruelty of the captains and the guards.

Improvements in the treatment of prisoners, better food, shorter hours of work, a better system of pardon and parole, attempts to rehabilitate prisoners by teaching them trades were factors in the decline of the worksongs. In addition, younger prisoners jeered at the old songs they associated with slavery times. In the words of Roosevelt Charles:

"Mattersafact the times got modern and they stopped slavin' as they used to. An' also the young race is not interested in the worksong now. You know, which back in the olden days in the thirties and the early forties which was all older heads. You know what I mean. An' they would get to workin' together, all would be workin' together, which would make work more easier to do. An' go to singin' and workin' an' the day would slowly pass away faster than it would gettin' out there an' workin' an' not sayin' nothin'.

"Nowadays the youngsters nowadays, modern class, on'y thing they think about is when the sun go down or how long they gonna have to work or when they gonna have a day off.

"Back in those days yo' lucky if yo' got off at 4 o'clock on Sunday afternoon. But nowadays they got a day and a half off at least. So they're not interested in the jolly time of doin' time; they're more interested in how to misuse their inmate with them.

"Sometime one or two maybe get together an' start to singin'. Well you might get a group to jine in wit' you of older heads. But at the time present as the time roll by all those older heads are dyin' out, some are goin' out. The 'fresh fish' (new convicts) are not interested in the old things. The first thing you hear one of them fresh fish holler, 'It's modern days now. We're not interested in that old John Henry stuff, because that was slavery time."

Thus, although most of the inefficient manual methods[4] of picking cotton, chopping wood, cutting cane, etc. are still used in

order to keep as many prisoners as possible busy, the prisoners now seldom sing worksongs. Occasionally when the sun is shining just right and the "misery" hits the "long line" of about a hundred prisoners working together with hoes or cane knives they moan a worksong like the "Bullin' Hundred," the poignant lament of frustrated Angola "bulls." But most of the time they toil in sullen silence.

(Dr. Harry Oster – 1959)

Footnotes:

1. St. Gabriel is another branch of the Louisiana State Penitentiary, a small prison farm which usually has about 150 prisoners, in contrast to the main prison, which is always bursting at the seams with about three thousand. As can be seen from the lines Charles quotes, lines which crop up frequently in the old worksongs, St. Gabriel had the reputation of being much less rough on its prisoners.

2. A month after I recorded Roosevelt Charles in prison singing spirituals and worksongs, he was released. When I interviewed him at my house in early 1959, he spoke more freely than he would have dared to in prison.

3. B. L. Krebs, New Orleans Times-Picayune, May 11, 1941.

4. The prison uses modern machinery such as cane-cutters, corn-loaders, and tractors often side by side with ancient manual devices, the cane-knife and the simple plow drawn by a mule.

The Songs:

1. Berta, hammer or ax song, sung by Big Louisiana (Rodney Mason), Reverend Rogers, and Roosevelt Charles while chopping up a log. As the axes flash in the dazzling sunlight, Big Louisiana sings of the favorite Angola woman, who is often called "Big-legged Berta." As the leader, Big Louisiana sings in pathetic wish fulfillment, Reverend Rogers sings in harmony while Roosevelt Charles serves as devil's advocate commenting cynically and diabolically on the fidelity of Berta.

1. Eighteen hammers fallin' get on line (3)
There ain't no hammer here ring like mine. Yah!

2. Ring like silver, Lawdy, shine like gold (3) Ya!
Blood's (?) on the hammer, it's never been told. Yee!

3. Lawd, Berta, hear me, gal.
Lawd, Berta, don't ya hear me, gal? Ya!

4. Ain't that Berta comin' down the road.
Down that road, road, man, (3)
Ain't that Berta comin' down that road, Yee!
Ain't that Berta comin' down that road, Lawd,
Walkin' like she got a heavy load? Yah!

5. Lawd, Berta, don't you hear me, gal?
Spoken: Yeah, I know she hear you.
Lawd, Berta, don't you hear me, gal?
Spoken: I know she lookin' right at you.

6. I been in Memphis, Berta, but I ain't been told,
I ain't been in Memphis, but I been told,
The women in Memphis got sweet jellyroll.
Spoken: Yeah just like honey, just like honey.
Have you been there too?

7. Come on Berta, hear me, gal.
Come on Berta, don't you hear me gal?

8. Berta say she love me, but I believe she lie.
Spoken: Yeah I know she lie.
Berta say she love me, but I believe she lie
Ain't been seein' me since-a last July.
Spoken: Last July, last July first, when she come here last.

9. Oh Berta darlin', hear me, gal. (2)

10. Berta's in the region natchly (naturally), got my mind,
Berta in the region natchly, she got my mind.
Spoken: Got mine, got mine, got mine, I can't go nowhere.
While I'm tryin' to do my time.
Spoken: I got to do it you know how it is, I got to do it.

11. Whoa, Berta, hear me gal.
Spoken: Hear me, hear me.
Hear me, ya hear me, gal, She lookin' right at ya.

12. I love you Berta, tell the world I do, (3)
Hope some day she come, love me too.

13. O come Berta, hear me gal.

2. Take This Hammer, Guitar Welch, lead; Hogman Maxey, and Andy Mosely. In his usually eloquent and colorful way, Roosevelt Charles described the sort of situation which must have originally goaded a prisoner into making up this song:

"This was when the train was rollin' down the track of Angola. They had a railroad runnin' around about. They had a railroad gang there and they had quite a few hammers on the line. There was a boy he had been roll and roll, sometime he'd be up through the night through the day. The sun was shinin' hot in the month of August you know that it's a very hot month. An' the sweat was beginnin' to roll along and he call the water boy and the water boy he refuse. He call for the boss and the boss turned his back. So the boy he laid his hammer on the spike and he begin to strike on the spike and these are the words he said:

1. This old hammer, most too heavy
Light weight man, Lawdy, light weight man.

2. Take this hammer, take it to the sergeant;
Tell him I'm, gone, Lawdy, tell him I'm gone.

3. If he asks you what got the matter,
Had too long, Lawdy, had too long.

4. I'm gonna roll on few days longer, (2)
I'm goin' home, Lawdy, I'm goin' home.
I'm goin' home.

5. Oh Berta, Berta gal, oh Berta, Berta gal,
Early in the mornin' 'bout the break of day,
Felt for my pillow where you used to lay,
Felt my pillow where you used to lay.

6. Oh Roxie, Roxie gal,
Rock, me, in a rocking chair,
If the chair turn over I don't bit mo' care.
Bit mo' care, babe, bit mo' care.

7. Alberta, let yo' bang grow long (2)
If you cry 'bout a nickel Alberta, yo'll die 'bout a dime.

8. All I want is my regular rights,
Three hard meals and my right at night.
Right at night, baby, three hard meals
And my rights at night.

9. Oh Rosie, Alabama Rosie, oh Rosie, Alabama Rosie,
Rosie, Rosie, don't you hear my name,
Same old Rosie, down in Texas town.

10. Texas, Texas, Texas town,
Oh Berta, hello gal, Berta, Berta,
If you was mine, baby,
Wouldn't do nothin' but the scotch and iron
Scotch and iron, wouldn't do nothin' but
Few days time.

3. Stewball, wood chopping song; Reverend Rogers, lead; Big Louisiana, Jose Smith. This worksong is remotely derived from an Irish ballad about a race horse named Skewball. (One of the oldest texts of the Irish song is in The Vocal Library, London, 1822.)

1. Had a great day
Down in Texas.
Don't you wish that
You were there

Group: Oh well.
Oh well.
Oh well.
Oh you were there.

2. So you'd bet your
Bottom dollar
On some fast run—
Runnin' mare—

Oh well.
Oh well.
Oh well.
Oh well.

Chorus: Run, Stewball,
Molly gone.

Oh well.
Oh Molly's gone.

3 . Well I gambled.
Out in Texas.
Well I gambled.
Out in Spain.

Oh well.
Oh well.
Oh well.
Oh out in Spain.

4. But I never
Been a loser
Till I learnt
The poker game.

Oh well.
Oh well.
Oh well.
The poker game.

Chorus:

5. Buddy Walker,
He's a talker;
Well he talk to
Hillel's son.

Oh well.
Oh well.
Oh well.
Hillel's son.

6. Well you turned-a
On the levee
And old Molly
She will run.

Oh well.
Oh well.
Oh well.
She will run.

Chorus:

Well I runnin'
Ninety mile a second
Up that ninety mile
Long hill.

Oh well.
Oh well.
Oh well.
Long hill.

8. Well I looked o'
Molly's shoulder
And I spied ole
Wild Bill.

Oh well.
Oh well.
Oh well.
Wild Bill.

Chorus:

4. Five Long Years for One Man, sung by Odea Mathews, while scrubbing clothes on a washboard. At Angola there is a separate section for women, called "The Willows" which houses about a hundred prisoners. Their main occupations are working in the tailor shop, where the prisoners' clothing is cut and sewn, and taking care of the laundry. The unfaithful Berta has a male counterpart in the songs of the female prisoners. Based on a popular juke box hit of the 1950s "Five Long Years" recorded by Eddie Boyd.

Chorus: Have you every been mistreated?
You know just what I'm talkin' about.
I worked five long years for one man;
Then he had the nerve to put me out.

1. I finally learned a lesson,
You know long time ago,
Next man I marry he got to work
And bring me some gold.

2. I got a job in a sawmill,
So I could feel I could play,
Five long years every Friday,
I went straight home with all my pay.

Chorus:

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5. Alberta Let Your Bang Grow Long, Guitar Welch, lead; Hogman Maxey, and Andy Mosely. This song (much like Guitar Welch's "Take This Hammer") accompanies the job of scraping headland, that is cleaning and sprucing up with hoes and rakes the strip of land which adjoins the road.

1. Alberta, let yo' bang grow long (2)
If you cry 'bout a nickel, Alberta,
You'll die 'bout a dime.

2. I'm goin' back to Jamaica, Virginia (2)
Oh when I leave here, Lawdy, when I leave here,
Oh when I leave here.

3. Alberta, Alberta, if you cry 'bout a nickel,
Alberta, you'll die about a dime.

4. Alberta, let your bang go down,
'Cause you hear me callin' you,
Alberta let yo' bang roll down.

5. This ole hammer ring like silver, (2)
Shine like gold, Lawdy, shine like gold.

6. Take this hammer, take it to the captain, (2)
Tell him I'm gone, Lawdy, tell him I'm gone.

7. If he asks you what got the matter, (2)
Had too long, Lawdy, had too long.

8. Oh Berta, don't you know my name, (2)
Same grand rascal want to be yo' man, baby,
Same grand rascal want to be yo' man.

9. Boat's up the river turnin' roun' and roun',
Struck deep water an' she dropped on down.
Dropped on down, Lawdy, dropped on down,
Struck deep water an' she dropped on down.

10. Boat's up the river, called the Stack-a-Lee,
Run from Missouri back to Tennessee,
Tennessee, boys, Tennessee,
Run from Missouri back to Tennessee.

Spoken: Tighten up fellers. Let's get through here.

11. I'm gonna roll on a few minutes longer, (2)
I'm goin' in, Lawdy, I'm goin' in.

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6. I Had Five Long Years, James Russell and gang. This is a slow-drag worksong, used for hoeing or cane-cutting. It is a variant of "Makes a Long Time Man Feel Bad." which Alan Lomax collected in the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman in 1947. About twenty-five years old, James Russell is one of the rare young prisoners who sing worksongs. Generally only those who are forty or over sing them.

1. Oh I had five years, one time, (2)
But I wrote, oh Lawd, my five years down.

Chorus: Make a long time man feel bad, (2)
When he can't, oh, get a letter from home.

2. Oh there must, oh, be a wreck on the road, (2)
'Cause I can't, oh, get a letter from home.

Chorus:

3. Roberta, oh, let yo' hair hang low (2)
Just as long buddy as my right arm.

Chorus:

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7. Early in the Mornin', Johnny Butler and gang. This cane cutting song, usually known as the "Bullin' Hundred," is the best known surviving group worksong at Angola. A gang of approximately a hundred prisoners (they refer to themselves ironically as bulls since they are frustrated and womanless) joins the moaning chorus of the song; often different workers lead the singing,

sometimes describing their own personal history in verses they make up, or more often drawing on a fund of traditional verses. When I asked Roosevelt Charles to describe the movements of cane-cutting he replied spontaneously:

Ya reach with yo' left hand,
Ya hit with yo' right hand, Ya top it off.
Ya knock the shucks off, Ya cast it in a heap row,
Ya moves on down the line.
Ya hear the boss hollerin',
"High top, low bottom, headland, and no trouble."
Down the other end an' right back
We got to get it out buddy just 'fore it get cold.
'Cause I hear the North wind blow jes' now.
Ya know the frost is flyin' an' the geese flyin' over.
We got to get it out jes' before it get cold.
My hand done got cold, an' my fingers is gettin' numb.
I don't know what the boss tryin' to do.
Sittin' roun' the fire, drinkin' coffee.

These remarks have an excellence of rhythm and evocativeness which a writer of free verse might well envy.

Gang: Let's hook 'em, let's hook 'em now. Woah.

1. Early in the mornin' by the ding dong ding,
Wake up in the mornin', serve the same old thing.

Gang: Oh man, oh, oh, oh man

2. Wasn't I lucky last summer when I got my time,
My buddy got a hundred, I got ninety-nine.

3. Who's that man, buddy, on that big white hoss,
I don't know his name but they call him boss.

4. If you see my sister tell her pray for me,
Tell my mother don't write to me.

5. Tell my buddy he got to write no mo',
I got a long time, sinner, they gonna see me no more.

6. *Repeat of 3;* 7. *Repeat of 2.*

8. If I had my pistol wouldn't do ne'er one. (2)

9. Well man, oh man, here come a dangerous blue,
Here come Joe comin', keep a-walkin' through.

10. High top, low bottom and it won't be long,
Can't haul by here and it won't be long.

11. Camp I, Camp A, two leadin' farms,
Don't come to Angola, this a murder's home.

12. I don't want no trouble (with) the boys I know,
I don't know you buddy though you live next door.

13. You talk about my buddy, you talk about a dangerous blue,
If I had my pistol, be a-dangerous too.

14. Waterboy, waterboy, put the bucket down,
If you don't bring me no water, throw the water down.

15. Hear me callin', buddy, by the light of the moon,
Early in the mornin' by the light of the moon.

16. Hook that water, buddy call the waterman,
Here come the head captain with his great big gun.

17. Late in the evening, buddy, the sun goin' down,
We got to cut this cane, buddy, let's get it down.

18. Watch my buddy, buddy he start to fall,
Help that boy, won't you make it long.

19. Cane knives jumpin', buddy, captain, people scream,
Headland, no trouble, let's make it through.

20. Woah man, woah man, as you go along, (2)
Late over in the evenin' by the midnight day,
We got to save this, buddy, got to save this hay.

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8. All Teamed up in Angola's Mule Lot, Roosevelt Charles, Arthur Davis, and Big Louisiana catching their mules and then plowing.

This plowing song abounds in superb examples of the bitter irony which is a characteristic feature of most of the worksongs. Instead of bringing the cool water a convict desperately craves, the water boy is going to boil the water and put salt in it. The singer is lucky in the brevity of his sentence, one year less than his buddy who was given a hundred. The wine bottle on the table comments ironically on the jury's decision. The reference to Lawyer Green suggests that the Black man accused of a crime would have no money to hire a lawyer; as he sees his plight, his only possible lawyers are the woods and the bushes.

Charles: Say man, head that red mule goin' over there in that corner.
Davis: That's yo' mule. That's yo' mule.
Charles: Man, that mule been runnin' me roun' here all this mawnin'.
Davis: The mule is comin' on 'cross. Hook up Lou an' Ella.
Charles: Well, I'm gonna catch Karen an' Dot back over there in the far corner.
Davis: We got a long row to pull this mawnin'.
Mason: Bring it roun'.
Davis: Say, stop that black mule over there in the corner.
Charles: Man that's your mule an' you better catch it too.
Davis: We plowin' on Louella's Bottom this mawnin'.

Charles: That's right. We got forty odd hundred acres o' land back over there; corn's about knee high, 'n' we got to get it out 'fore sundown.
Mason: You know, fresh fish, won't ya come here an' help me catch my mule, weasel?
Charles: Fresh fish!
Davis: I ain't gonna worry that man.
Charles: Fresh fish? You's a old fish. The scales on you done got dry, man. I don't know what you talkin' about. What that mule there?
Mason: You wanna take my mule, Beebe?
Charles: Mule, you better try to catch your own mule. I got mine, I'm gone.
Davis: He's runnin' away!
Charles: Let him run. I got mine. They ain't goin' nowhere.
Davis: Got time to hook up this big plow here, boy. We gonna walk away.

1. Well, it's early this mawnin',
I got a long way to go.
Group: Ah-hmm.
Group: Ah-hmm.

2. I told the waterboy
To bring some ice along.

3. The waterboy told me, man,
He gonna boil the water,
He's gonna put salt in the bucket.

4. Man you know I can't hardly make it alone.

5. Now look-a here, captain,
Why don't you help poor me?

6. I got a long time,
An' I ain't started yet.

7. My buddy got a hundred,
I got ninety nine.

8. Now wasn't I lucky
Oh when I got my time.

Spoken: Well I believe that ole judge was mad. Yeah.
And that old DA was angry Yeah!
An' I believe them twelve jury-men they was drunk! Yeah!
Cause I seen the wine bottle sittin' right on the other end.
Charles: Say, man, what's over yonder on that other headland?
Davis: That's corn.
Charles: I see them hounds comin' cross the levee, too.
Mason: Somebody run off. Who was it, wonder did old Joe make it to Lawyer Green?

9. *Davis:* Well I think I'll call Molly,
Oh he done gone.
Well-a Molly is a runnin'
Charles: All day long, long, long.

10. *Davis:* Well, a bell is a ringin'.
Charles: Oh early in the mawnin'.

11. *Davis:* Oh don't ya see the water,
Charles: Comin' down the road, road, road.

12. *Davis:* Well the water is a-rollin',
Charles: Oh in a hurry.

13. *Davis:* Well goin to the monkey.
An' the monkey holla.
Charles: Oh yeah.

14. Well, my little, captain.
Oh yeah.
Well he's mad.
Oh yeah.

15. Well he comin' in the mawnin'.
Yeah, Yeah.
I catch my mule.

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9. I Got a Hurtin' in My Right Side, Willy Rafus and gang in track-lining operation. The boss yells instructions to the crew, who insert their lining bars under the track and synchronize their movements with the rhythm set by the song leader. The refrain is repeated until the boss shouts his directions about the next joint of track. Then the operation is repeated a few yards down the track.

Until 1948 there were forty miles of track to cover the 18,000 acres of Angola's prison farm, but trucks and tractors have supplanted the old railroad. Some of the railroad steel was used to reinforce the concrete of the factory for manufacturing number plates.

The tune of this song is substantially the same as that of the track-lining song Allen Prothero recorded in the Tennessee State Penitentiary at Nashville in 1933 for the Library of Congress.

1. *Leader:* Oh Mary weeped and Martha moaned,
Who's gonna weep when Martha's gone?

Gang: Who's gonna weep, Martha's gonna moan, (2)
Mary's gonna weep, Martha's gonna moan. (2)

Boss: Whoa boys—two times back and drive on.

2. *Leader:* Well if I hadda knowed that the boss was mean,
Never would-a left outa New Orleans.

Gang: If I hadda knowed, etc. (2)

Boss: Well, boys, gonna try to pass the section house at three o'clock. Drive on.

3. *Leader:* Oh stoop down low an' pick up straw,
'Fraid they comin' an' it won't be long.

Gang: Stoop down low, etc. (2)

Boss: Well boys, drive them spikes a little tighter, John Henry; tighten up on that track. Move on.

Leader: Oh ain't no hurtin', just a pain,
Keep me lingerin', boys just the same.

Gang: Ain't no hurtin', etc. (2)

Boss: Whoa there boys, lighten up on that slack, diamond is loose there. Drive on.

Leader: 0h early in the mornin' when I rise,
I got a hurtin' in my right side.

Group: Soon in the mornin', etc. (2)

Boss: Well, boys, pick 'em up one time. Let's go to the house.

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10. Let Your Hammer Ring, Big Louisiana, lead; Willy Rafus, and Arthur Davis. Originally this song accompanied the driving of spikes into the wooden ties which held railroad tracks in place. The basic tool was a ten-pound hammer with two heads, hardly more than two inches in diameter. The steel-driving man swung freely in a complete circle about his head, then brought the hammer unerringly down on the spike. Since the railroad's disappearance at Angola, the same song has often been sung, as it is here, to facilitate wood-chopping.

Unlike many of the group worksongs, "Let Your Hammer Ring" has artistic unity. The subject in this magnificent song swings naturally from the ring of the hammer to ringing a plea to the governor for pardon; the desire for a pardon leads logically to thoughts of Berta and a picture of her pleading to the judge for her man; with the singer now in prison, the next feeling is a fear that she will find another lover, then a fear that she doesn't love him anymore, that she may not even know him anymore, surprising since he had the prowess to carry off the captain's watch and chain (a most unlikely crime), and finally there is a coda to the song; the hammer is on fire, like the singer himself.

1. Ring 'em all together,
Group: Let yo' hammer ring.
Ring 'em all all together,
Group: Let yo' hammer ring.
Well, I ring for the governor, etc.

2. We got to ring 'im all day long.
Well, I believe I'm double jointed, boy.

3. Well, I'm loaded from my right arm.
Well, they call me John Henry, boys.

4. Well, don't you be scared boys.
Well, you know it's nothin' but my hammer.

5. Well my hammer's in the wind boys.
Well I'm ringin' for the governor, boys

6. Well, governor, don't you hear me.
Well, I wants to go home, boys.

7. Well, governor promise to pardon me.

8. Well, governor won't you hear me.

9. Well I believe I spied Berta.
In my midnight dream, boys.

10. She standin' ahead of my bedside.
In a nicklegee (negligee).

11. Well I left my woman.
She's in the courthouse cryin' boys.

12. "Well, judge, can't you help my man."
Well I'm going away to leave you, gal
But I'll be back home, gal.

13. Don't you let nobody,
Tear my playhouse down, gal.

14. Well, Berta, don't you love me gal?
Well, I'm done gone crazy, gal.

15. Well, gal, don't you know me now?
I'm the same grand rascal,
I stole the captain's watch and chain, gal.

16. Oh let your hammer ring, boy.
Oh well my hammer's on fire, boy.

17. Well, waterboy come, boy, waterboy. (4)

18. Won't you let me catch my wind now boys.
Because I'm done gone balmy.

19. We got to walk all day long. Let your hammer ring.

20. Well I rung for the major, boys. (4)

21. Well captain, don't you know me?
Won't you let me catch my wind.
Spoken: Done burned out! Waterboy!

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11. Cleaning This Highway, Willy Rafus, lead; Andy Mosely, and Johnny Butler. This worksong, which here accompanies the slow motions of scrapping a black-top road, is an effectively poignant expression of convict despair.

1. Oh I sighed I'd write that black woman a letter,
Oh partner, but I believe I'll go myself;
Oh the letter too slow, telegram may get lost.

2. Oh, oh, I suffered for that woman yesterday,
Oh partner, here she come today.
Wo-oh you know I think about that woman, boy,
When she go away.

3. Wo-oh-oh-oh I went to the commissary laughin',
Laughin', boys, I come back cryin'.
Yeah, you ain't through payin' for
Them stockin' that you been buyin'.

4. Oh look-a-here pretty baby
What a fix you got me in.
Well I'm down here in a Louisiana pen.

5. Oh-oh-oh gettin' cloudy, woh, boys, look like rain,
Oh—before this time another year,
I may be old an' rollin' but I won't be here.

6. Oh if I hadda knowed that the boss was so mean,
Oh—good buddy, I never would-a left out-a New Orlean'.

7. Oh—when I get my new house built,
Oh, baby, build my chimney up higher,
Well, so the rats won't be comin' down the chimney,
Puttin' out my fire.

8. Trouble, trouble, is all in the world I seen,
Oh I'm cleanin' this highway, highway boys,
Wonderin' what gonna become o' me.

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12. John Henry, Guitar Welch, lead; Hogman Maxey, and Robert Pete Williams. This greatest of African American ballads, here sung as a gravel-shoveling song, is fragmentary in this variant. In more complete variants, someone comes to the captain of a rock-drilling railroad crew with a new invention, the steam drill, which he claims is much more efficient than the old-fashioned method of having a steel-driving man swing a big hammer on the drill held by the "shaker," the worker who shook the drill loose whenever it got clogged with rock fillings. The boss decides to settle the question by pitting John Henry, his best man, against the machine in a race to see which could drill the fastest. In this epic situation of man against the machine, John Henry nobly proclaims:

A man ain't nothin' but a man,
Before I let this steam beat me down
Lawd, I'll die with my hammer in my hand,
Lawd, Lawd, I'll die with my hammer in hand.

In true epic tradition, John Henry wins, but dies in the attempt. For a brief moment one man has held the onrushing Industrial Revolution at bay.

Guitar Welch's first stanza is a confused survival of lines from Child Ballad 76:

Oh who will shoe my bony foot?
Or who will glove my hand?
Or who will bind my middle jimp
With the broad lilly band?

Inflation has left its mark on Guitar's variant; the sum necessary to awaken the interest of the singer's woman was once two dollars.

"Boy this steel is sure hurtin' my back. Boy, I sure hate to lay this steel today! Well we might as well get it on over with."

1. John Henry had a little woman,
And they called her Polly Ann;
Well who gonna glove her pretty little feet,
Mama, I'm gonna glove yo' hand,
Yea, I'm gonna glove yo' hand.

2. John Henry told his captain,
Says, "Captain when you go to town,
Bring me back a twelve pound hammer,
So I can drive your steel on down.
Lawd, Lawd, I can drive your steel on down."

3. John Henry said to his captain,
"Oh captain—a man ain't nothin' but a man;
Just before I die with the hammer in my hand,
Lawd, I'd die with the hammer in my hand,
Lawd, Lawd, I'll die with the hammer in my hand."

4. It's, "Big black nigger" when I'm gone,
And it's "Honey, darlin'" when I'm home,
But as soon as I get hold a twenty dollar bill,
It's "Baby, where you been so long?"
Lawd, Lawd, it's "Baby, where you been so long?"

5. John Henry says to his mother,
Says, "A man ain't nothin' but a man,
Before I let this steam beat me down,
Lawd, I'll die with this hammer in my hand,
Lawd, Lawd, I'll die with this hammer in my hand."

Spoken: "Shovel a while boys, shovel. Boy this sun so hot I just don't know what to do. Let's get it over with. Boy it's near about 12 o'clock and I be so glad Waterboy! Waterboy ain't here. We got another ten foot to go yet."

6. John Henry, oh John Henry.
John Henry taken sick,
And Polly drove steel like a man,
Lawd, Lawd, and Polly drove steel like a man.

7. John Henry said to his father,
"If there's one more train I want to ride,
That's the Santa Fe, and the Southern Pacific,
On that I. C. Railroad Line,
On that I. C. Railroad Line,
Oh, Lawd, that I. C. Railroad Line."

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13. Somethin' Within Me, a spiritual sung by Odea Matthews while sewing seams on an electric sewing machine in the Tailor Shop. As in more traditional worksongs, she operates the machine in rhythm with her song. In the Tailor Shop there are about thirty female prisoners,

cutting, shaping, sewing seams, putting on buttons, etc. in a mass production system with each woman performing one basic operation over and over again.

1. There's somethin' within, oh Lawd,
That's holdin' the rain, yes it is;
Somethin' within, oh chile,
I cannot explain, yes it is.
Somethin' within me, oh Lawd,
I cannot explain,
Oh yes, all I can say,
Praise God, something' within.

2. Have you somethin' within you,
Oh yes that's burnin' inside?
Yes it is, somethin' within, oh chile,
You know that never gets tired.
Somethin' within you, oh Lawd,
It never gets tired, And all I can say,
Praise God, somethin' within.

3. Have you somethin' within you, oh Lawd,
That's burnin' inside?
Then if you have, oh chile,
Is that a heavenly flower,
Yes it is, somethin' within you, oh Lawd,
I cannot explain;
All I can say praise God, somethin' within.

4. You know I met God one mornin', oh yea,
I was so feelin' bad, yes it is;
My heart felt elated. Oh chile,
I had a bowed down head.
He lifted my burdens,
Oh yes and my poor heart felt glad,
An' all I can say, praise God, somethin' within.

5. Have you somethin' within you, oh Lawd,
That's holdin' the rain?
Oh yes, somethin' within you, oh chile,
I know you cannot explain,
Somethin' within you, oh Lawd,
You cannot explain,
An' all you can say praise God, somethin' within.

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14. Jesus Cares, sung by Murray Macon, while operating a stamping press.

Although the theory is that mechanization automatically eliminates the worksong, here is an example of a machine worksong recorded in the prison factory in which the number plates for the entire state of Louisiana are made.

Two workmen operate a huge stamping press. The one who doesn't sing is responsible for pushing the lever to raise or lower the press. The other, Murray Macon, whose job it is to move the number forms out of their frame in the machine and replace them with the appropriate

numbers from his rack, which stands on a steel table beside the machine. As Murray sings, usually a spiritual or a gospel song, he rhythmically whips the old numbers out, bangs them on the table, whisks the new numbers into their frame. His partner pushes a control, the press comes thunderously crashing down—over and over again, all perfectly in time with the song.

Oh Jesus cares when I'm oppressed,
I know, I know that Jesus He cares, He cares.
I remember when I was a little boy,
Father would call me,
Call me 'bout, Son, Son, don't you worry,
Jesus will always, Jesus will always make a way.
Oh Lord sometime Mother would moan
Oh the sun would catch on fire, Ah
I'll be a witness, I know God cares,
He sees, He cares.

The above 14 selections were originally issued in 1959 on the Prison Worksongs LP produced by Dr. Harry Oster. These 14 songs constitute the best of the work songs he recorded at Angola, except for an alternate version of "Take This Hammer" (#17) which I have added. Dr. Oster also sent me some remarkable work songs he had collected outside the confines of the penitentiary. I felt it was important to include several of these (#15, 16, 18, 19) since they are of the same genre and were commercially seldom recorded. Work songs or field hollers (also known as Hoolies or Arwhoolies!) were the basis for most blues and for the name of my record label which I started in 1960. Emanuel Dunn's very vivid stories are especially noteworthy and are valuable additions to the limited literature of rural African Americans available to us. Both Emanuel Dunn and the Scott sisters were introduced to Harry Oster by Robert Pete Williams and his circle of friends and musical acquaintances in the Baton Rouge area.

(Chris Strachwitz / editor July 1997)

15. Working on the Levee, Part 1 (Good Morning Captain) sung by Emanuel Dunn.

Emanuel Dunn was born April 9, 1924 near Liberty, Miss. He was his parents' 7th child but was abandoned by them at an early age. He referred to himself as "layed by the buzzard and

hatched by the sun". Obviously a very intelligent man, Emanuel Dunn was also very eloquent even though basically illiterate and he was probably well known as a story teller in the small black community of Liberty, Miss. At age seven he left school to work in the fields and sawmills. Perhaps we can consider him an early "rapper" - before that genre came to prominence and surpassed the blues in popularity. He also played elementary guitar - but obviously story telling was his tour de forte. Dr. Oster brought Mr. Dunn to Urbana, Ill. for some folklore concerts in the 1960s and recorded more material by him for possible release in the future.

16. Working on the Levee, Part 2
17. Take This Hammer sung by Big Louisiana. (Recorded at Angola.)
18. Pickin' Cotton All Day Long sung by two sisters, Creola & Ceola Scott who were very religious and not particularly fond of this type of secular material..
19. My Mule "Grey" sung by Emanuel Dunn.

(Note: if anyone knows of the whereabouts of any or all of the singers and musicians on this CD, please contact Arhoolie Records)

Some comments by Dr. Harry Oster about the CD release of this material:

At the time when I started recording this material, I was intrigued by the worksongs which were essentially obsolete in the South, because the kind of work which the songs were supposed to expedite was now mostly mechanized. So I thought the prison which has a plantation economy attached to it where labor is essentially free, would be one where worksongs would still flourish. Even there the worksong had become obsolete and the younger convicts tended to sneer at it as belonging to the world of slavery and nothing the self respecting Black who liked contemporary African American music or rock and roll would want to be associated with. But there were older convicts who knew the worksongs and were happy to reconstruct the performances for me and as I dug deeper into the tradition, I discovered there were people outside the prison world who had gone through many of the same experiences and performed similar songs, songs about working in the fields and on the levees, though the group tradition was pretty difficult to find outside prisons.

In this reworking and reissue of the original prison worksongs material, which came out years ago as an LP, we've added several performers who weren't on the original worksongs record and who had no stay in a prison to darken and make even more tragic their generally difficult lives, but many of the same feelings and frictions in the sense of bitter tragic irony come across in some of the songs that are sung, most especially by Emanuel Dunn. The songs recorded of the prisoners have a lot of commentary and expression of tragic irony in relation to the lives they led in the past and the confinement they're still leading. Some of the songs which I collected from singers in the outside world also reflected this feeling that life was a prison and the music was a way of adapting to the imprisonment, and of converting the experience, the frustration into a work of art, into a song, into a story that had rich language, high eloquence, beautiful figures of speech: a kind of wonderful folk poetry.

On the other hand, a great deal of the African American music is a form of catharsis, a way of letting off your frustrations and anger and if one compares some of the popular Black music of today with some of the folk expressions of the past, the most significant parallel perhaps, occurs in relation to rap music which is something that ties in perhaps with African traditions of chanting. The challenges involved contain elements which are parallel with the dozens, the African American way of having a competition of verbal dexterity in insulting one's opponent. It's interesting that despite all the commercialization that has gone on and that goes on, even in contemporary forms, certain clear folk impulses continue and are still energetic and dynamic as reflected in the intensity of rap music which has in it very clear connection with both the genuine African tradition of storytelling and high verbal dexterity and contests of wits and cleverness as well as being at the same time a way of tearing into something that's artistically constructed and gives the singer or chanter a kind of control over the harsh world that he's a part of. It gives him a certain sense of being able to deal with it, to convert it into something sharp and witty and clever.

(Dr. Harry Oster – 1997)

PRISON WORKSONGS

Recorded at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola, La., by Dr. Harry Oster

ARHOOLIE CD 448

1. **BERTA** - sung by Big Louisiana(Rodney Mason), Rev. Rogers, & Roosevelt Charles
2. **TAKE THIS HAMMER** - sung by Guitar Welch, Hogman Maxey, & Andy Mosely
3. **STEWBALL** - sung by Rev. Rogers, Big Louisiana, & Jose Smith
4. **FIVE LONG YEARS FOR ONE MAN** - sung by Odea Mathews
5. **ALBERTA LET YOUR BANGS GROW LONG** - sung by Guitar Welch, Hogman Maxey, & Andy Mosely
6. **I HAD FIVE LONG YEARS** - sung by James Russell
7. **EARLY IN THE MORNIN'** - sung by Johnny Butler
8. **ALL TEAMED UP IN ANGOLA'S MULE LOT** - sung by Roosevelt Charles, Arthur Davis, & Big Louisiana
9. **I GOT A HURTIN' IN MY RIGHT SIDE** - sung by Willy Rafus and work gang
10. **LET YOUR HAMMER RING** - sung by Big Louisiana, Willy Rafus, & Arthur Davis
11. **CLEANING THIS HIGHWAY** - sung by Willy Rafus, Andy Mosely, & Johnny Butler
12. **JOHN HENRY** - sung by Guitar Welch, Hogman Maxey, & Robert Pete Williams
13. **SOMETHING WITHIN ME** - sung by Odea Mathews
14. **JESUS CARES** - sung by Murray Macon
15. **WORKING ON THE LEVEE** Part 1 (Good Morning Captain) - sung by Emanuel Dunn
16. **WORKING ON THE LEVEE** - Part 2
17. **TAKE THIS HAMMER** - sung by Big Louisiana
18. **PICKIN' COTTON ALL DAY LONG** - sung by two sisters, Creola and Ceola Scott
19. **MY MULE "GREY"** (A Plowing Song) - sung by Emanuel Dunn

Lead is sung by first singer(s) listed.
Recorded by Dr. Harry Oster at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, La. and other locations, mostly in 1959.
Edited and produced by Dr. Harry Oster
Executive producer: Chris Strachwitz

Cover Photo by Dr. Harry Oster
Cover design by Wayne Pope

#1- #14 were originally issued as Folklyric LP A-5 and re-issued as Arhoolie LP 2012.
#15 - #19 are previously unreleased items.

Part of the royalties from this CD will go to the Inmate Welfare Fund, which is responsible for recreation and providing musical instruments at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, Louisiana.

File Under: BLUES